

WHITEROCK CONSERVANCY TAKING SHAPE

Coon Rapids, IA. January 25, 2007.

As 2006 ended, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF) conveyed 1,886 conservation acres and \$1.7 million to Whiterock Conservancy, after holding the assets as a bridging mechanism while this nonprofit land trust completed its start-up phase.

The INHF transfer to Whiterock Conservancy forms part of what will eventually be a 5,000-acre donation and one of the largest private land gifts ever made in Iowa.

“We are enormously grateful to INHF for their key role in helping to launch Whiterock,” said Conservancy Executive Director Tolif Hunt. “Their experienced staff has provided us a great deal of leadership and technical assistance over the last couple of years.”

The process began after the death of Iowa farmer and conservationist Stephen Garst in 2004. His widow, Mary Garst of Coon Rapids, Iowa, and her five daughters sought guidance from INHF’s President Mark Ackelson about how to best protect and preserve the family’s extensive conservation lands located in west-central Iowa.

These included 4,300 acres of rolling pastures and timber extending eight miles southeast of Coon Rapids along both banks of the Middle Raccoon River. These picturesque valley lands had been used by Stephen for cattle pasture, hunting and fishing, and by daughter Liz as part of a small ecotourism business, Garst Farm Resorts.

Since 1979, the INHF has worked with hundreds of Iowa’s private landowners to protect nearly 100,000 acres throughout the state. In this case, the six women explained their hopes and vision: they wanted the land restored to native prairie and oak savannah, but were also interested in agricultural research and education and in continuing the family tradition of opening the land and its fishing ponds for public use.

Given these complex aspirations, the INHF recommended going farther than a conservation easement or simply donating the land to the county or the state. Rather, the decision was to create a new nonprofit land trust specifically to receive and manage the huge area. The organization was named “Whiterock Conservancy” after a local name for some light-colored bluffs along the river.

Since the land gifting process will take a full decade, the Garsts wished to start donating the first parcels of land right away, before end 2004. Launching Whiterock, however, was going to take some time. In stepped INHF to hold the land and cash gifts while the new organization began to take shape.

The first step was to put together a board of directors that would share Whiterock’s innovative agro-environmental, research, and public use mission. Besides sisters Liz, Rachel and Jennifer Garst, Whiterock’s first board includes the INHF’s Ackelson, Fred Kirschenmann of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Lyle Asell of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources

(who replaced the DNR's Mike Brandrup after his 2006 retirement), and Des Moines agribusinessman and environmentalist Robert G. Riley.

Whiterock had no initial staff, so the sisters volunteered to help the new organization get going. Liz served as unpaid Executive Director; Rachel, as volunteer Outreach Coordinator, and Jen worked on internal policies.

Over the last two years this start-up team sought input from environmental experts from across the state, arranged for plant and bird surveys, began to restore neglected fishing ponds and prairie remnants, and hosted hundreds of birdwatchers and astronomers coming to enjoy great birding and exceptionally dark skies. In addition, Whiterock also partnered with the town of Coon Rapids to win a coveted state Great Places designation.

In 2006, a \$1.2 million Garst endowment gift enabled the hire of Whiterock's first paid Executive Director. After a nation-wide search, the board hired Tolif Hunt in September. Hunt comes to Iowa from the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, where, as Director of Agricultural Conservation, he worked in watershed management, conservation-friendly highway design, and a \$145-million public-private Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Hunt will now lead the planning, partnership, and fundraising efforts needed to finish staffing and consolidating Whiterock.

Another landmark was reached December 12, when the IRS approved Whiterock as a nonprofit public charity, based on its role of supporting the overlapping missions of INHF, the Leopold Center, and the DNR. Hunt explains, "Whiterock will now be able to accept tax-deductible contributions directly from public and private sources, increasing our ability to develop environmental, agricultural and public recreation programs together with our partners."

In December, the DNR established the Raccoon River Savanna Bird Conservation Area (BCA). Anchored by Whiterock to the north, Springbrook State Park to the southeast, and Elk Grove Timber to the southwest, this 36,000 acre designation will allow all private landowners within its boundaries to have increased access to habitat improvement programs. Landscape-scale habitats are critical for many threatened bird species.

Whiterock is also working with both the Leopold Center and the DNR to establish long-term environmental monitoring protocols. Many rare plant, bird, insect, and mammal species have already been found, including the Long-Eared Owl, the Meadow Jumping Mouse, the Lance-Tipped Darner dragonfly, the Regal Fritillary butterfly, and various wetland prairie plants. Habitat restoration efforts and new grazing regimes are expected to lead to significant increases in biodiversity and demonstrate how production and conservation are possible on the same acre of land.

INHF, besides its bridging role in the start-up phase, is supporting Whiterock's efforts to design and upgrade trails on the acreage. Plans include a paved trail linking Whiterock to the Coon Rapids business district, as well as miles of internal multipurpose trails tailored to mountain bikers and equestrians.

A portion of Whiterock public access infrastructure costs will be supported with a \$1 million Great Places designation from the Iowa Legislature; the rest have yet to be raised. A more long-term aspiration is for the Coon Rapids-Whiterock area to become a major bike trail hub for west-central Iowa.

This winter, Liz Garst will also donate to Whiterock the small ecotourism business Garst Farm Resorts, including the historic farm house where Nikita Khrushchev visited seed corn pioneer Roswell Garst in 1959.

Whiterock will thus be able to offer the general public access to the Khrushchev house, cottage rentals, camping, outdoor education events, canoeing, hiking, and biking, and to host events, gatherings, and weddings. The goal is both to generate income that can be plowed back into land restoration, and to get visitors onto the land and help educate them about valley history, sustainable agriculture, and the environment.

Once fully opened, Whiterock Conservancy is expected to attract some 50,000 people a year, thus giving an economic boost to the entire area.

“There is an important narrative here about rural change,” says Hunt. “The Garst family story goes from Roswell Garst’s promotion of the green revolution to Steve’s efforts to improve hunting habitats to this generation’s interest in biodiversity and rural tourism. Whiterock’s mission is to use this history, and the assets entrusted to us, to explore innovative options that support a vital and sustainable future for Iowa’s rural areas.”

* * * * *

If you wish to make a tax-deductible contribution to assist in Whiterock’s start-up, please send your check to: Whiterock Conservancy, 1390 Highway 141, Coon Rapids, IA, 50058.

* * * * *

If you wish to be removed from Whiterock's mail list, please call Connie Goode at 712-684-2964 or email infor@whiterockconservancy.org

CONTACTS:

Tolif Hunt, Whiterock Conservancy Executive Director; 712-684-2697, tolif@iowatelecom.net, www.whiterockconservancy.org; Rachel Garst, Whiterock Outreach Coordinator/Great Places Director, 712-651-2015, rgarst@netins.net; Liz Garst, Garst Farm Resorts, 712-684-5240, lizgarst@gliddenwildblue.com; Mark Ackelson, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation President, 800-475-1846, 515-288-1846, www.inhf.org; Fred Kirschenmann, Whiterock Board Chair, Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, ISU, 515-294-5588, leopold1@iastate.edu